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ABSTRACT

This report examines students', teachers', and parents' reactions to standardized testing and whether the move to raise academic standards has improved the quality of college students and new employees. It is based on telephone interviews conducted in the last quarter of 1999 using a national, random sample of 604 K-12 public-school teachers, 615 parents of public-school students, 605 public-school students in middle or high school, 260 employers, and 251 professors. Among the findings, employers and college professors remained highly dissatisfied with students' basic skills. Even with this disappointment, all groups in the survey continued to endorse many of the principles behind standards reform. However, many schools had either not adopted some changes advocated by reformers, or teachers, parents, and students remained unaware of them. Parents did continue to express confidence and satisfaction in their children's academic experience, though few of them were aware how their child's school compared with other schools. Many of the teachers surveyed had a different perspective on issues related to standards, testing, promotion, and accountability; most of them claimed that the schools were performing at a high level and that their colleagues were highly qualified. Teachers viewed low pay as the chief obstacle to attracting and keeping top college graduates. (RJM)

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Public Agenda: Reality Check 2000.

February 16, 2000

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SPECIAL REPORT

PUBLIC AGENDA
Reality Check 2000

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Employers and professors say basic skills still a problem among high school graduates.

Benjamin Tice Smith

By latest count, 49 states have launched large-scale initiatives to raise academic standards in public schools, a movement that has broad support among the public, elected officials, and education decisionmakers. Although strategies vary from state to state, they often include clarifying teaching and curriculum guidelines, tying promotion or graduation to specific skills, eliminating promotion based on age, and testing students periodically to ensure progress.

For the past three years, Public Agenda's *Reality Check* surveys have asked the nation's public school teachers, parents, and students, as well as employers and college professors, whether they are in fact seeing higher standards and improved student achievement in their own communities. The surveys do not cover every strategy that districts are using to raise standards, but they do gauge progress in areas that standards advocates themselves often identify as crucial. *(See page 8 for details on how the surveys are conducted.)*

Neither Better Nor Worse. Overall, this year's surveys show little change from the previous two years. Employers and college professors remain broadly dissatisfied with the skills of young people entering jobs and higher education. Answers from teachers and students suggest that many schools have not yet adopted the promotion, testing, and accountability policies often advocated by reformers. Parents are generally content with the academic side of their child's schooling, but many of their perceptions are starkly at odds with those of employers who hire and professors who teach young people coming out of

About This Report

Reality Check, a joint project of Public Agenda and *Education Week*, is an annual report on the progress of the academic-standards movement and the impact of reform efforts on schools and the work world as seen from the perspectives of education's key stakeholders. The Pew Charitable Trusts and the GE Fund provide support for the project.

The two previous editions of *Reality Check* appeared in the Jan. 11, 1999, issue of *Education Week* (*Quality Counts 1999*) and the Jan. 8, 1998, issue of *Education Week* (*Quality Counts 1998*).

Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in New York City, designed the surveys on which this report is based and prepared this summary of the findings. More findings from the *Reality Check* surveys are available online at www.edweek.org and www.publicagenda.org.

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high school. This special report summarizes these and other key findings from this year's surveys.

This year, *Reality Check* also includes a special focus on the teaching profession—how the profession is regarded and what might be done to attract and keep talented people in the field. Earlier editions of *Reality Check* hinted, and this year's survey confirms, that teachers themselves have distinctive views on many of the controversies surrounding their profession—views that often differ sharply from those of other groups surveyed.

Finding 1:

Employers and college professors remain highly dissatisfied with students' basic skills.

For the third year in a row, some three out of four of the country's employers and college professors say that today's high school graduates have just fair or poor skills in grammar and spelling and the ability to write clearly. Clear majorities give similarly lackluster ratings for basic math skills and in areas such as being organized and on time, and being motivated and conscientious.

Majorities of employers, professors, teachers, and parents say they favor high-stakes tests.

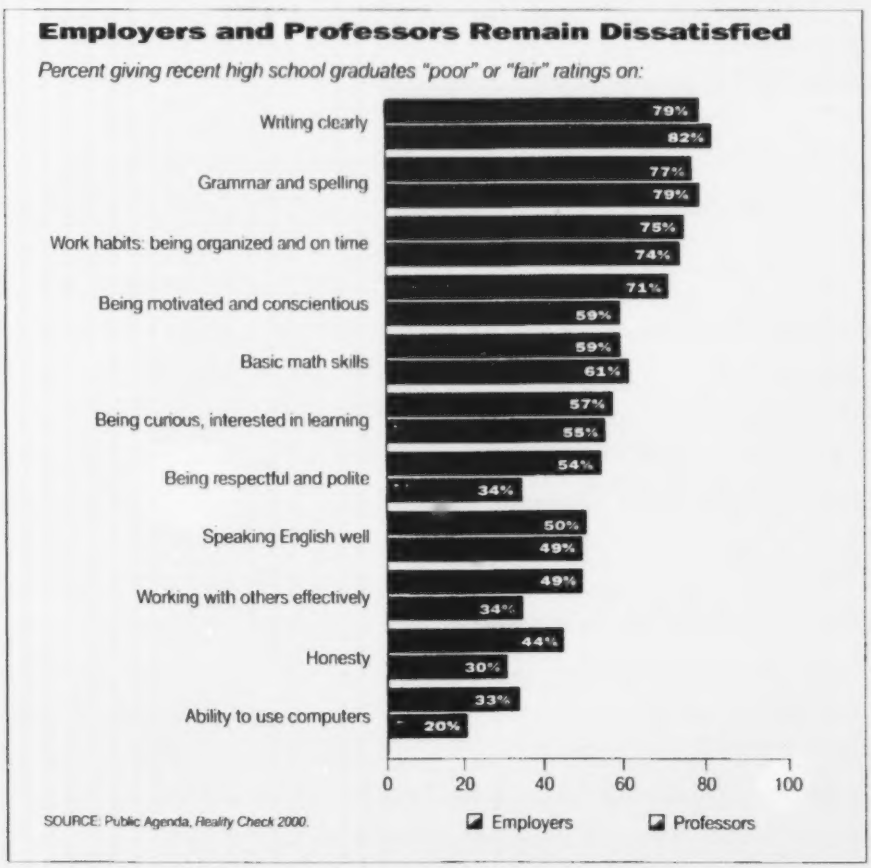
Judgments are mixed in other categories, and in general the employer/professor ratings show little change. Both groups, however, make some distinctions among the 11 items that *Reality Check* tracks. Employer ratings have gotten notably worse in the area of young people's honesty. In 1998, just 33 percent of employers gave graduates fair or poor ratings in this category; by 2000, the figure had jumped to 44 percent. But ratings on graduates' ability to use computers have improved continuously. This year, 75 percent of professors say incoming students have good or excellent computer skills, up from 61 percent just two years ago. Similarly, 64 percent of employers give the young people they see high ratings for their computer skills, up from just over half (53 percent) in 1998.

Reality Check surveys employers and professors because—as the people who hire or teach young graduates—they are, in effect, education's ultimate consumers. Given their fairly dismal critique of student skills, it seems only fair to point out that most employers and professors have not yet encountered youngsters who have been taught under a high-standards system for all or even most of their school careers. And, while majorities of employers (78 percent) and professors (86 percent) criticize schools for not pushing students hard enough, it also seems worth noting the potential leverage their own institutions could have: For most of today's high schoolers, getting into a good college (85 percent), getting a scholarship (85 percent), and having to show a transcript to a prospective employer (77 percent) top the list of what they say would make them study harder in school.

Finding 2:

All groups—employers, professors, teachers, parents, and students—continue to endorse many important principles behind standards reform.

Reality Check continues to show strong support among all groups for some of the key principles driving the higher-standards movement. Large majorities of employers (90 percent), professors (92 percent), teachers (81 percent), and parents (83 percent) believe having guidelines helps students learn. Majorities of all groups—employers (73 percent), professors (82



percent), teachers (81 percent), parents (78 percent), and even students (57 percent)—also agree that it is much worse for a child to be promoted to the next grade without having learned needed skills than for him or her to have to repeat a grade in order to catch up. Support for this concept has remained strong and essentially unchanged since *Reality Check* was launched.

Majorities of employers (87 percent), professors (79 percent), teachers (60 percent), and parents (79 percent) also say they favor high-stakes tests—exams students must pass in order to be promoted. By ratios of about 2-to-1, teachers (64 percent), parents (63 percent), and students (61 percent) all say inner-city youngsters should be expected to reach the same standards as children from more affluent backgrounds. Earlier Public Agenda research has shown that large majorities of both African-American and white parents believe that a good or excellent way to help minority youngsters in failing schools is to pass them only when they have learned what they are supposed to know. Surveys by the Gallup Organization and others have also found broad support for these ideas among the general public.

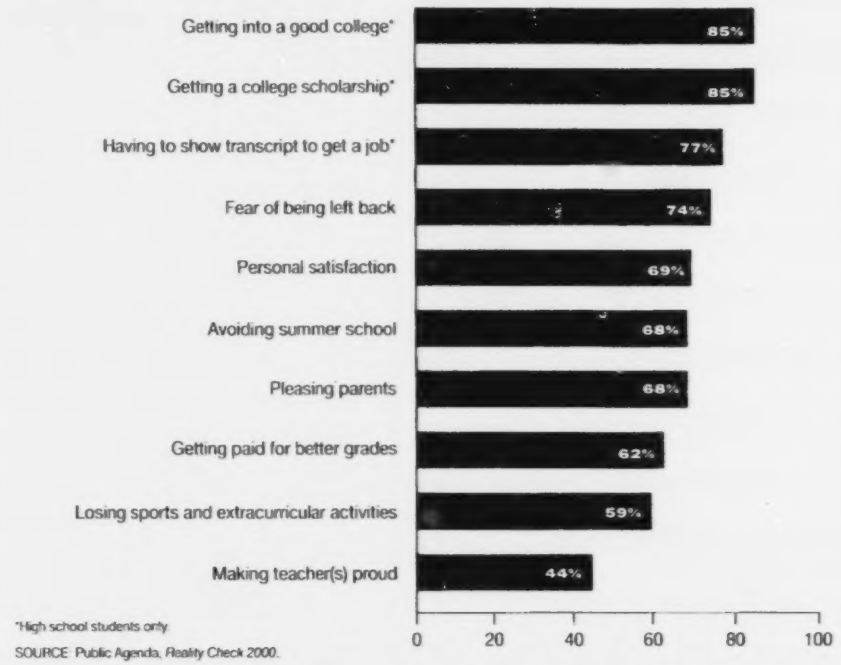
Many decisionmakers have worried that the public—and parents especially—may recoil from standards when they begin to see the results: more youngsters held back, more forced to attend summer school, and more denied diplomas because they lack specified skills. So far, parents have been remarkably consistent in their views, and most teachers say they have rarely, if ever, been pressured to promote youngsters who are not ready. In fact, most groups surveyed for *Reality Check* are not particularly pessimistic about the consequences of raising standards. Just 20 percent of parents, 24 percent of teachers, 12 percent of employers, and 9 percent of professors strongly agree that high-stakes testing will result in schools' being overwhelmed by many failing students.

Public Agenda's larger body of research does suggest, however, some nuances in public thinking that standards advocates may want to bear in mind. One is that parents and the public generally think of standards as guaranteeing minimum basic skills, rather than what they may see as more advanced or esoteric knowledge. Like employers and college professors, they are mainly advocating that youngsters have a strong command of written and spoken English, basic math, and a common knowledge grasp of history, geography, civics, and other core topics.

The second point to bear in mind is that parents and the public expect struggling students to be given strong support and additional chances to catch up. While *Reality Check* shows that most parents (79 percent) approve of high-stakes tests as a part of standards, fully half (50 percent) strongly believe it is unfair to hold back a student or require summer school based on the results of one test. People envision schools where no youngster graduates without strong basic skills. They do not envision a system where a child's entire academic future turns on the result of a single, high-pressure exam, or where schools toss children aside, essentially leaving them to fend academically for themselves.

Students: What Motivates Us to Work Hard in School

Percent of students saying these things would motivate them "a lot":



*High school students only.

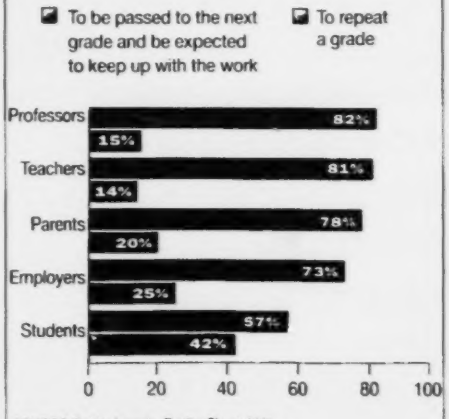
SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000*.

Finding 3:

***Reality Check* suggests that many schools have either not adopted some changes advocated by reformers, or that many teachers, parents, and students are unaware of them.**

Majorities Agree: Badly Prepared Students Suffer When Promoted

Percent saying it is "worse" for a child who is struggling in school:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000*.

According to results from this and previous *Reality Check* surveys, virtually all teachers (97 percent) say their state or school district has adopted some type of guidelines spelling out what students should learn and know at various levels of their education. But results from all three years show a gap between what has been established as policy and what actually seems to be happening in schools. Despite the omnipresence of standards, just 42 percent of teachers say they receive most of the guidance about what they should teach from state standards—about the same as last year (46 percent). Fewer than half of teachers (44 percent) say they have increased expectations of students as a result of standards (again, about the same as last year—49 percent).

Many reformers have also urged the use of gateway tests to ensure that students have mastered certain skills before advancing to a higher level of study. According to *Reality Check*, gateway testing is common, but not predominant. About half of grade school parents (48 percent) report that their child must pass a basic-skills test before being promoted to middle or junior high school. Fifty-seven percent of middle school parents say this is true for their child to be promoted to high school. And about half of high school students (48 percent) say they must pass an exit exam to get a diploma—a number that has remained about the same since last year (52 percent).

In many districts, ending social promotion has been a controversial feature of standards reform, and for the past three years *Reality Check* has asked teachers whether their school has an automatic-promotion policy based on age. In this year's survey, a little more than a third of teachers (36 percent) say their school has such a policy, a percentage that has dropped just slightly from 41 percent two years ago. At this point, the decrease is not statistically significant, although a further drop next year could signal a decline in this practice.

But *Reality Check* also suggests that even if students are not promoted based on age, it does not necessarily mean they are always promoted based on mastery of knowledge or skills, as many standards advocates recommend. Almost half of teachers (48 percent) report that colleagues at their school generally pass a student who has tried hard, even if he or she has not learned what was expected. Four in 10 students (40 percent) and parents (41 percent) also say this is the case.

There are unsettling gaps between the way parents see their children's schooling and the judgment of employers and professors.

Finding 4:

Parents continue to express confidence and satisfaction in their children's academic experience, but their judgment is often jarringly different from that of employers and professors.

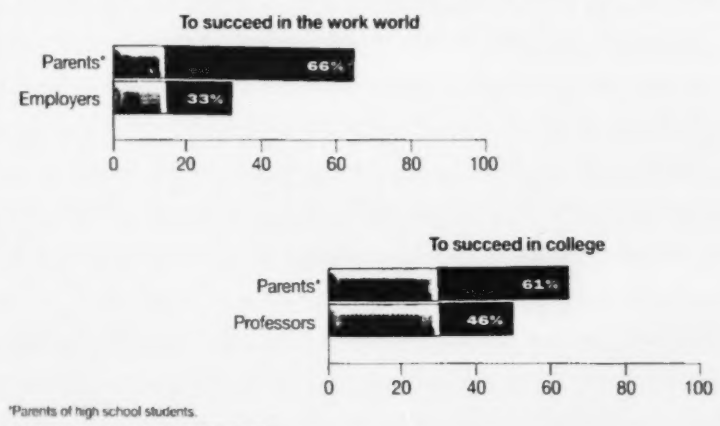
Most parents continue to voice satisfaction about the academic aspects of their children's schooling. More than seven in 10 parents (72 percent) say their local public schools are doing a good or excellent job, and most (65 percent) say academic expectations at their own child's school are about right. Almost half (47 percent) strongly believe their child's school puts a lot of emphasis on academics and high grades. Teachers get good marks from parents on their dedication and effort, although parents appear to be divided on whether teachers are doing all they can to help their child learn in school; 50 percent of parents say teachers are doing everything possible here, but 44 percent say teachers could be doing more.

The report from parents would be reassuring if there were not so many unsettling gaps between the way parents see their child's schooling and the judgment rendered by future employers and professors. While two-thirds of high school parents (66 percent) say their child will have the skills to succeed on the job, just 33 percent of employers say the youngsters they see have what it takes. Similarly, while 61 percent of high school parents are confident their child will flourish in college, just 46 percent of professors say incoming students are adequately prepared.

Reality Check also continues to reveal a sharp discrepancy between the amount of trust that parents, teachers, and students place in a high

Do High School Grads Have What It Takes?

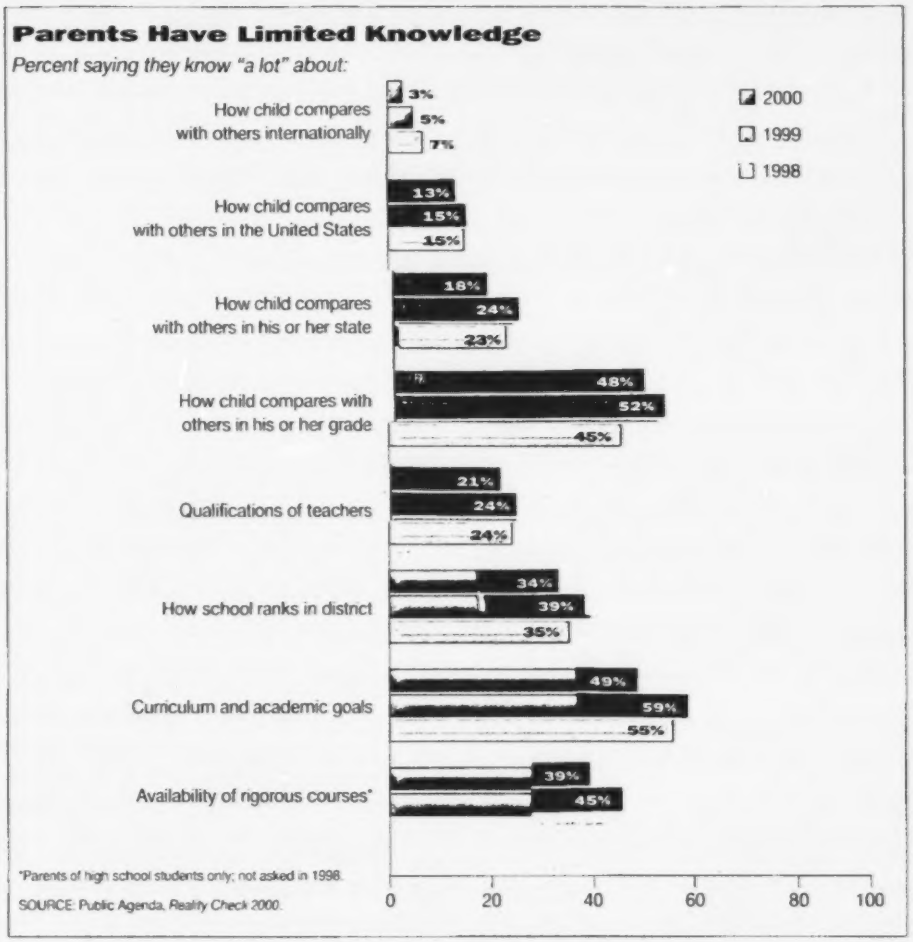
Percent saying their children "will have the skills to succeed" in each of the following:



*Parents of high school students.

SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000*

school diploma and the lack of confidence employers and professors have in it. While two-thirds of parents (66 percent), and even higher numbers of teachers (74 percent) and students (77 percent), say getting a diploma means a youngster has mastered at least basic skills, just 39 percent of employers and 33 percent of professors say this is so (although the figure for professors has risen from 22 percent in 1998). A similar discrepancy shows up on grades. While six in 10 parents and high school teachers say report cards accurately reflect student abilities, considerably fewer professors (23 percent) and employers (34 percent) agree.



Finding 5:

***Reality Check* shows that few parents have a solid base of information about how well their child or their child's school performs compared with others, but parents who are familiar with school report cards are much more knowledgeable.**

According to *Reality Check*, most parents are fairly uninformed about how their child's skills compare with those of children in other communities, and most know very little about how their child's school does on standard criteria such as college admissions or teacher qualifications. While about half of parents (48 percent) say they know a lot about how their child compares academically with other children in the same grade, few can say the same about comparisons with children in the same state (18 percent) or across the country (13 percent), much less internationally (3 percent). What's more, only one in five parents (21 percent) say they know a lot about teacher qualifications, and only small proportions say they would be able to identify the college-admission rate (27 percent) or per-pupil expenditure (19 percent) at their child's school. In fact, class size is the only area out of 12 covered where most parents (72 percent) seem to be well-informed.

This year's *Reality Check* also looked at the impact of individual school report cards—progress reports that evaluate how well a school is doing on a variety of measures. Fifty-six percent of teachers, but only about a third of parents (32 percent), say report cards of this kind are available for their school. This discrepancy suggests that many parents are not aware of school report cards, and, in fact, 15 percent of parents say they are unsure whether their school has such a report card, compared with just 4 percent of teachers.

While report cards are sometimes controversial, *Reality Check* suggests that parents who are familiar with these ratings vehicles are much more knowledgeable about their child's school. For example, parents who are familiar with school report cards are significantly more likely to be knowledgeable about their school's ranking in the district (51 percent to 25 percent), college-admission rate (39 percent to 20 percent), teacher qualifications (33 percent to 14 percent), and other criteria. Parents familiar with report cards are also more likely to know how their child compares with others in the same grade (59 percent to 40 percent) or in the same state (28 percent to 14 percent). What is not clear, however, is whether parents have gleaned this information from the report cards themselves, or whether it is merely the more knowledgeable, conscientious parents who pay attention to this information.

Finding 6:

Teachers take a markedly different perspective on many issues related to standards, testing, promotion, and accountability.

It is common sense to expect that classroom teachers would have a special perspective on many issues that arise when school systems attempt to

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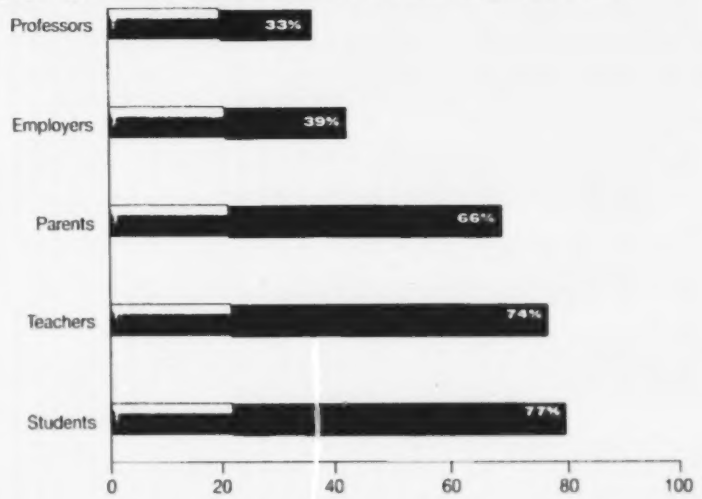
Employers and Professors Doubt Value Of High School Diploma

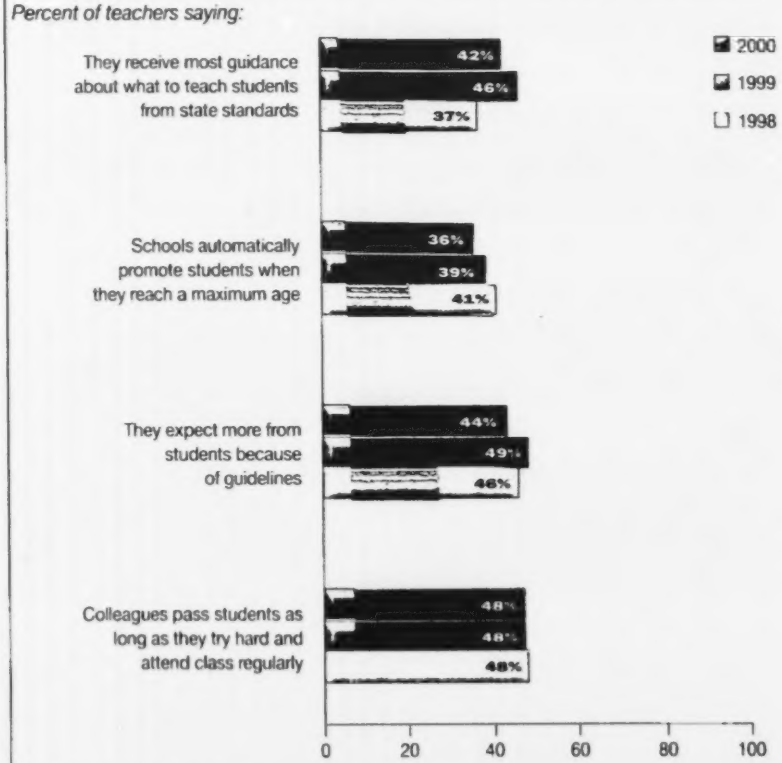
Percent saying a high school diploma means student "has at least learned the basics":



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000*.

Teachers: Little Change in Standards Practices

Percent of teachers saying:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000*.

set higher standards and improve student achievement. Teachers are, after all, precisely in the eye of the standards hurricane—it is their job to do everything humanly possible to help children learn, but teachers cannot in fact do the learning for them.

In the past three years, *Reality Check* has revealed many areas where public school teachers' views are distinctive. Teachers consistently say that public schools are already doing a better job than most people think. As noted earlier, teachers, unlike most employers and professors, are convinced that a high school diploma means a student has mastered the basics. Teachers (67 percent) are also more likely than employers (21 percent) and professors (27 percent) to say that public schools offer a better education than private schools; they are more than twice as likely (50 percent) as employers (15 percent) and professors (22 percent) to say that public schools have higher academic standards than private schools. Almost seven in 10 (69 percent) strongly believe that public school teachers are doing as good a job as they can given lack of parental involvement, compared with just 38 percent of parents who say this.

Last year's *Reality Check* showed—and this year's study confirms—that teachers are more dubious than other groups about many proposals connected to standards reform. Just 22 percent of teachers say it is a good idea to tie financial incentives for teachers and principals to student achievement, compared with 59 percent of parents, 51 percent of employers, and 36 percent of professors. Teachers (32 percent) are also less likely than parents (51 percent), employers (59 percent), or professors (40 percent) to strongly agree that high-stakes testing makes teachers and students more accountable. According to other research Public Agenda has completed, teachers are far more likely to focus on other measures—reducing class size, increasing resources, promoting stronger parental involvement, and encouraging better student motivation and behavior—as the best ways to foster higher achievement.

Finding 7:

Teachers believe that most of their colleagues are highly qualified, and that low pay is the chief obstacle to attracting and keeping top-notch college graduates. Parents, employers, and professors agree that low pay is the major hurdle, but these groups are less laudatory about the current teaching corps.

Given their distinctive views on so many issues related to public schools and standards, it is perhaps not surprising that teachers have a particular take on the state of the profession itself. Almost two-thirds of teachers say that young people now entering the profession are either the "cream of the crop" or better than average (63 percent). In contrast, more than half the parents (57 percent), employers (58 percent), and professors (57 percent) surveyed say young people who now choose teaching are at best just average. Forty-five percent of teachers strongly agree that new teachers in their school go through a rigorous hiring process, but just 22 percent of parents, 18 percent of employers, and 29 percent of professors think this is the case in their schools. Teachers also voice more confidence in their colleagues: Seventy-seven percent strongly believe that most teachers are committed to their profession—and six in 10 professors tend to agree—compared with just 48 percent of parents and 34 percent of employers.

Teachers are more dubious than other groups about many proposals connected to standards reform.

All groups are more likely to see low pay, rather than lack of prestige or cumbersome certification policies, as the chief obstacle to attracting talented people to the field, but teachers are especially likely to see this problem as preeminent. Sixty-nine percent of teachers —compared with 56 percent of parents, 40 percent of employers, and 47 percent of professors—say low pay is the chief reason qualified people often don't go into teaching. All groups endorse paying more to get qualified teachers in areas where there are shortages, such as math or science. But while employers and professors (55 percent of both) say it is a good idea to open up the profession to qualified people who may not meet all certification requirements, parents are somewhat more skeptical (only 42 percent agree), and teachers are clearly opposed—35 percent favor this; 63 percent oppose it.

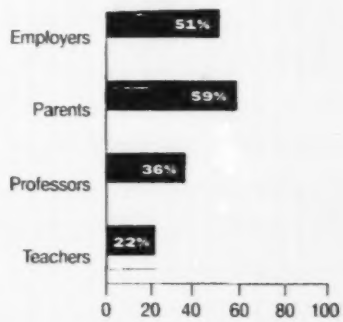
The Status of Standards. The goal of raising standards in American public schools has remarkably broad-based support. The public, parents, officials of various political stripes, and professionals in sectors as diverse as business, academia, and philanthropy all endorse the cause. Controversies about standards center more often on the means—retention, high-stakes testing, etc.—than on the goal itself.

For many in the standards movement, the lack of change in this year's *Reality Check* will come as no surprise. Few expect far-reaching change in just a few years. Nevertheless, *Reality Check* uncovers—once again—some troubling gaps in perspective that seem to cry out for address. The talk about standards is ubiquitous, but teaching patterns often remain the same. Parents' satisfaction with their chil-

Teachers Oppose Some Accountability Measures

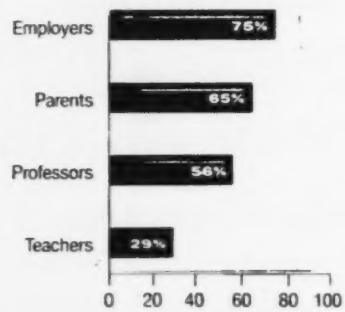
Percent saying proposals are a "good idea":

Tie financial incentives for teachers and principals to student improvement



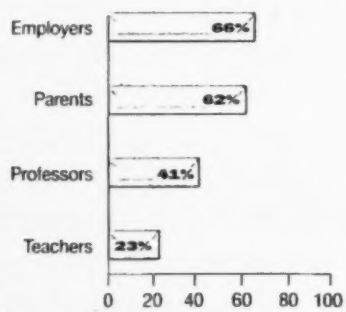
11% of teachers say this has happened in their district.

Replace principal tenure with contracts that would be terminated if schools failed to reach specific goals



13% of teachers say this has happened in their district.

Overhaul persistently failing schools by replacing teachers and principals and keeping them under strict observation



8% of teachers say this has happened in their district.

SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000*.

The question is whether it is reasonable to expect change to proceed with such divergent viewpoints.

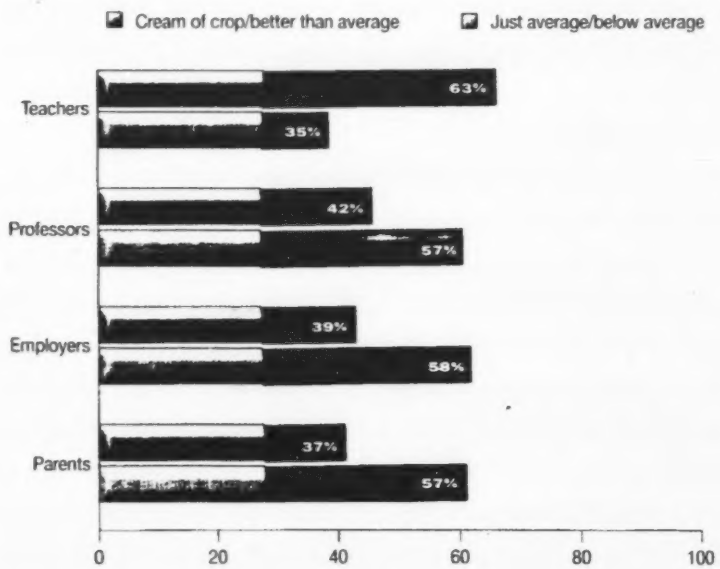
dren's academic skills seems utterly at odds with what employers and college professors have to say. And teachers define the problems facing schools differently and have significant concerns about many of the chosen solutions. It may be reasonable to expect that change will take time. The question is whether it is reasonable to expect change to proceed with such divergent viewpoints among the key players.

Methodology. Telephone interviews were conducted in October and November 1999 with national random samples of: 604 K-12 public school teachers; 615 parents with children currently attending public school in grades K-12; 605 public school students in middle or high school; 260 employers who make hiring decisions for employees recently out of high school or college; and 251 professors at two- and four-year colleges who taught freshmen or sophomores in the last two years.

The margin of error for teachers, parents, and students is plus or minus 4 percentage points; for employers and college professors, plus or minus 6 percentage points. ■

Teachers More Confident About Those Entering the Profession

Compared with other college graduates, are people who choose teaching as a profession the cream of the crop, better than average, just average, or below average?



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000*.

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